

Aicha Ech Chenna, the Mother Teresa of Morocco.

Single motherhood in Morocco is a major taboo in society in which single mothers are often shunned from their peers, their families, their friends and even the partners they had children with.

The social stigma combined with the criminal repression leads to social and economic marginalization, social segregation, intolerance, discrimination and even brutality, both in the private arena and the public and ostracised by society, eventually becoming the pariah of the latter. They are often kicked out of their homes and left to fend for themselves doing irregular menial jobs (mostly cleaning), if they are even that lucky.

Pregnant single mothers must bear the brunt of being associated with prostitution, negative terms implying a sexually promiscuous nature and adultery, chiefly due to Islamic and Moroccan norms that assert that children can only be conceived after marriage. Because of such, single mothers are regrettably regarded as the bottom of the social barrier, because Islam and Moroccan society strictly forbids sexual outside of marriage, to which women bare the brunt of.

The woman's hymen serves to reflect the family's honour, and when broken, so is the family's honour, which bring forth of endless hearsay and the neighbours' murmurs, gossip and rumours.

Some women are so shunned and are driven to the point of suicide, much like the case of Fadwa El Aroui, a 21-year-old single mother of two who had self-immolated in protest of her treatment by Moroccan society and the lack of support she was faced with.

Furthermore, there are cases in which unmarried pregnant women are inclined to take herbal treatments and medicines in the hopes of losing the child, and should that not work, will resort to illegal and generally unsafe abortions. Some women do not possess the means of either and end up giving birth in unsafe conditions, as per Moroccan and Islamic law, a (married) father must be present for the birth of the child for legal reasons. Doctors and nurses have the right to involve the authorities should a unwed mother give birth to a child, which could lead to the humiliation and the possible arrest of the mother-to-be. Thus the inevitable *chouha*, shame in colloquial Moroccan Arabic, impends.

Women are subjected to harassment and taunting in the streets. In Morocco, word gets around relatively quickly of the locals' happenings, everyone knows everyone else's business, so it is inevitable that such news should spread around. This will prompt women's life in the public sphere to be a living hell. They are likely to be met with taunts such as she is dirty, having a bastard child, and good for nothing. Single mothers will often feel that they have lost their value and are worthless, and no one will accept them should they want to marry in the future. They are essentially prisoners of their own home.

As the child will get older, questions will arise. In Moroccan law, a child must obtain identity papers (which will eventually comprise the father's name), in order to enrol into school and have basic legal rights. But such is impossible.

What's more, the Moroccan penal code categorises unwed single mothers as prostitutes due to the fact that there is no tangible marriage certificate.

It is also worth mentioning that the situation for children born out of wedlock in Morocco is precarious, as most of these babies will be left abandoned in orphanages which are in terrible conditions, most of these babies are in ill health, and some are even left to die. The lucky ones who are able to live suffer terribly — without a name, without papers, they are condemned for life as bastards.

The treatment of single mothers (and their children) in Morocco prompted Aicha Ech Chenna wanting change, and fast.

She herself was raised by a single mother, and experienced great difficulty in obtaining a good education given her familial circumstances.

Ech Chenna has been fighting this battle on behalf of Moroccan women since the 1970s, as she became disapproving of the name-calling and stigmatisation both the mother and the child have had to face in Moroccan society.

Association pour la solidarité féminine is not just an association, but a safe space for mothers, giving them a sense of home. It's a centre that supports women, renders them assertive and aids them to be able to stand on their own two feet. The association was founded in the hopes that this can change the attitude amongst the Moroccan public, possibly leading to amendments in the Moroccan penal code.

It all started out when Ech Chenna witnessed in horror a woman give up her child which was obviously born out of wedlock, and bearing witness to several babies being abandoned to their mothers' non-marital status. She first worked with families in which she was somewhat successful in persuading the families to accept their daughters, for the men to marry the daughters. But it was nowhere near enough to help these women. This pushed her to want to create a safe space for these babies, and eventually, these women.

Ech Chenna says that "once [a Moroccan woman] knows how to stand on her two feet, she is able to stand up for herself and her child and speak up for her rights." She continues to say that "when a woman is able to defend herself and fend for her child, she is able to earn the respect of her surrounding community".

She wants it to be that the woman herself is able to change society's perception of her and change society as a whole, by showcasing dignity, self-determination and

Aich Ech Chenna is regarded as one of the most pioneering women of social justice in Morocco. She campaigns for the rights of single mothers and their children. Ech Echenna left school at 16 and began working as a nurse, then she furthered her education once more, granting her a position at the Moroccan health ministry, and eventually becoming a coordinator of health research programmes. She says Morocco's government should educate men and women to avoid the current miserable situation single mothers face in the country.

Association solidarité féminine, a non-governmental organisation, was founded in 1985, - solely with volunteers - in which the objective is to provide a shelter and a safe space for single mothers, as well aiding them in acquiring professional skills and competences in a number of fields such as catering, patisserie baking, health and beauty, hairdressing, sewing

and hammam services, all in order to enable the women to generate an income which will help them provide for themselves and their children, while offering physical and emotional support. It is a source of livelihood and empowerment for the unwed single mothers who work here. It is also the first organisation of its kind to dedicate its cause to aiding women to become independent and rely on themselves, when others can't. these women independent. And able to lead an as a normal as possible life, despite their situation. The organisation also offers educational services to the women- women's literacy rate in Morocco is staggeringly low-, as well as day care services for the child. All in all, the association's main goal is to prevent the abandonment of children born out of wedlock, abandonment of children by the socio-economically rehabilitating the mother and to further advance women and children's rights.

Ech Chenna was motivated by the plight of single mothers in Morocco for her to found ASF, which has eventually expanded over the past 30 years into various centers across Casablanca.

Beyond directly serving unwed mothers, Aicha has developed a dual strategy to increase paternal recognition and support for children born out of wedlock. She advocates for legal reform that requires fathers to take paternity tests, while she also mediates between mothers and fathers about the importance of parenting roles.

The association assists around 500 women a year, and also provides legal advice for women, should they find themselves in such situations.

However, her work and activism has not come short of criticism and controversy. Ech Chenna has received numerous death threats, while being accused of inciting and encouraging prostitution. When discussing her cause with the media, particularly during an interview with Al Jazeera in 2001, certain Imams have gone as far as declaring a fatwa against her, calling for her death.

In addition to improving the lives of single mothers, Ech Chenna's activism has transcended the above, and has been applauded for her valiant efforts for her contribution to the legalization of abortion in Morocco, but with certain circumstances such as a child being conceived due to the result of rape, a feat unachieved by many Arab and Muslim countries.

Ech Chenna's valiant efforts have not gone unnoticed, as she is the recipient of the Opus Prize (Humanitarian Award) in the United States in 2009, the title of Knight of the Legion of Honor in France in 2013 or another award from the World Bank in 2015. She can only hope that she is treated with the same recognition in her country of origin.

By pushing forward legal reforms and developing the first program in Morocco to serve unwed mothers, Ech Chenna is a national figure and advocate for all people.

Ech Chenna wants unwed mothers to be able to say that they are mothers and proud to take care of their babies.